THE NIGERIAN JOURNAL OF RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT.

VOLUME 7 NUMBER 1, DECEMBER 1999.

Communication Needs of Rural Women for Effective Response to Appropriate Technologies in Improving Agricultural Productivity In South Western Nigeria.

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Abstract.
Achieving an efficient and sustainable farming system in the world of today is rapidly taking various governments attention. Rural farmers are the key players in the solutions of agricultural problems emanating from inefficient practices. The constant search and improvements in farming, agricultural systems and technologies through efficient communications have frequently excluded the rural farmers who are the primary producers of food products. The bulk of these rural farmers are the women who invariably reside in the rural areas of Nigeria. It, therefore, becomes relevant to determine and put in place the communication needs of these rural women for improved agricultural productivity. This paper addresses the concept of agricultural communication and information needs of rural women farmers, the appropriate technologies for agricultural production, ways of involving women potentials in agricultural productivity, and the strategies for improving rural women effectiveness for response to appropriate technologies in agriculture in South Western Nigeria.

Introduction and the Concept of Communication and Information Needs.

A good programme to enhance women's participation in production, reproduction, income generating activities and health behaviours must be based on their needs and interests. Communication needs of women on agricultural programmes must be based on the needs, interests and concerns of the women which will go a long way to raise the awareness about, and the understanding of the social, economic, political and technological systems of the society in which they live.

The type of communication assistance provided for women farmers are predominantly inappropriate to their production needs and circumstances. This lack lusture attitude from government, non-governmental agencies, corporate organisations and individuals is based on the prevailing misconceptions that a woman's role is only that of a mother and wife and also to take care of the immediate family members needs. This gives room for serious marginalisation with regards to what they mostly engage in – farming. Since women farmers engage in useful areas like.

- Occupational and household skills
- Nutrition
- Environmental Sanitation
- Childcare
- Mothercare
- Family planning
- Home management
- Gardening of crops especially vegetables.
- Livestock keeping.

and other income generating activities e.g. petty trading, there is the need for the improvement of the skills required in these areas as they affect appropriate technologies for agricultural productivity through efficient communication.

The importance of promoting and improving communication needs of rural farmers for efficient farming systems and sustainable agricultural development is increasingly being recognised the world over especially in developing nations. Communication is a two-way-process between the sender and the receiver and the ideas that go in between the two is the relevant "information" which is needed. Much of the needed information in agriculture are to support the spread of research results and technologies to the agricultural communities, marginal producing areas, less favourable ecosystems which are all inhabited by the low resource base farmers particularly the women. Emphasis in communication is to develop and maintain an efficient and cost effective service to disseminate and share information on agricultural and rural development. This will invariably begin the search for true meaning of development in less priviledged areas of South Western Nigeria.

It is increasingly becoming important to beef up efforts to make this information more available and more efficiently to the end users – farmers, non-governmental organisations, government organisations, National Agricultural research systems etc. The transmission of agricultural research information must take into account new

types of information management systems, new information conduct system and must reflect local realities and needs of women farmers in South Western Nigeria in relation to modern technologies from planting up to sales and marketing of their domestic farm products and also livestocks.

According to an old saying, "Information is power", it is also a key to economic development and avenue for rural transformation. The term "Information" has varying definitions given by scholars, experts and laymen. According to Aguolu (1989):

"Information embodies inter-related or structured data which are required to enable one to react knowledgeably as well as to take appropriate decisions ... Information constitutes messages of human experience. It assumes a response in the receiver, and therefore, possesses a response potential. It can be transferred physically or electronically, evaluated or raw, accurate or inaccurate. How the receivers of any information react to its content is conditioned by their intellectual and social needs, level of literacy and education, motivation, cultural attitudes and value systems."

The use of modern electronic computers and other modern communication gadgets are most considered to facilitate significantly the work of communication experts and extension workers in agriculture especially in the developed world. The story is quite different in the underdeveloped world. Not much impact of all these technological innovations and inventions are felt in the agricultural sector. Cheap and efficient communication aids development and since rural areas have been left behind, efforts at better telecommunications and wider access to modern electronic information technology (e –mail, internet, intranet, telnet, worldwide web etc) will have a chance to catch up these areas with what goes on in urban centres. Efforts are now being made by some developing countries to emulate the developed world through information network system that connects co-operatives in rural areas to research institutes in urban centres. At the press of a computerised button, recent and ready made information could easily be retrieved and made available to co-operative farmers headquarters and then on to individual farmers on request in any area of need in relation to agricultural productivity.

For effective response to appropriate technologies, women farmers need relevant information on their day to day farm activities on;

- Cultivation practices and systems
- Soil conservation practices
- Technologies on crops planting
- Weeding of crops especially arables,
- Harvesting
- Storage systems on perishables
- Processing
- Sales and Marketing etc

On animals, in areas of

- Housing Management
- Feeding and Nutrition
- Environmental Sanitation
- Pests and Disease control
- Product handling e.g. Milk, Eggs.
- Vaccination etc.

From co-farmers, extension workers and information centres regularly. Adequate information flow allows for changes and improves the society's economic growth and social equality. Keen competition and the need for rapid access to reliable information are major elements in the food marketing chain of agriculture and industry and these are vital to the overall success of agricultural and industrial ventures. This is arduous and complex as no single information can satisfy all the various situations on the farm.

Appropriate Technologies for Agricultural Production.

Appropriate technologies for agricultural production should not be understood only as crop varieties, animal species, agricultural tools, husbandry practices, farm plans, processing equipment etc. In a broader sense, technologies also include mental constructs; it embodies certain cultural codes and forms of management and co-operation, local level organisations; local learning and consolidation. It is closely related to the cultural concepts and values of their social group; their ways of thinking and communicating, their relationship to nature, the norms that shape their social organisation.

Appropriate technology is necessary and will mean that technology (or change) which

(1) Can be put into practice immediately and under farmers' present agro – socioeconomic condition and

(2) Is acceptable to target farmers. The utility of appropriate technologies can be judged from two related perspectives: that of the usefulness to farmers and that of the usefulness to the larger society.

The technologies to be used must be consistent with farmers' natural and economic circumstances and must promise improved incomes while keeping risks within reasonable bounds. Technologies which do not meet these standards are not appropriate and should not be taken up.

In specific case of women farmers in South Western Nigeria, the agro-socioeconomic conditions and appropriate technologies are such that:

- should not involve any form of huge financial commitments,
- concerns the types of crops and animals raised locally.
- suits the climate conditions of the area,
- the growing crops are of economic value and may easily be marketable in the producing areas.
- should not be associated with any form of taboos
- should be affordable by all.

When a first time visitor or an outsider takes a cursory look or observes rural communities and the activities taking place there, there is a temptation to look down on farmers' way of life and their efforts to survive, which superficially appear not to be very successful. This is obviously for lack of modern technological approaches to his/her farming systems. Local rural farmers rely on their indigenous knowledge (IK) in which ideas, experiences, practices and information generated locally or are generated elsewhere but have been transformed by local people and incorporated into their way of farming/agricultural lives (Ann Waters Bayer et al, 1997). IK is not statistic nor does it depend only on local ideas. The community also absorbs, transforms and internalises ideas from outside, so that they become a part of their IK. It gives dignity to the local farmers and puts them on an equal footing with the outsiders involved in the process of technology development.

The appropriate indigenous technologies enable the farmers to control what happens in their immediate communities and specifically on their farms and this enforces the main decision-making role back to the farmers themselves. Relevant information about such indigenous technologies that will require efficient spread and dissemination among the rural populace include – farming/cropping systems, soil conservation methods, cultivation systems, soil tillage practices, erosion control, soil fertility and nutrient management, nursery techniques, harvesting, processing, packaging, sales, marketing of crops and animals products etc.

Guidelines for Achieving Communication Needs of Appropriate Technology.

In meeting the communication needs of these appropriate technologies in rural communities, it is crucial to avoid certain biases as they could impede progress and serve as stumbling blocks. This issue is of paramount importance to rural development administrators and state-holders so that concerted efforts could be pooled in the proper direction. Biases to be avoided should include

- road bias; not restricting movements and exploration to households that are within easy reach.
- elite bias, confining contacts and visits to educated and better-off farmers
- gender bias; meeting mainly male farmers and not interested in female farmers.
- size bias; restricting visits and contracts to large farms, and
- production bias; concentrating only on production and neglecting post-harvest preservation, processing and feed preparation.

These biases can be avoided by including women colleagues in the extension team; inviting women to act as community guides; developing a rough map of the community together with guides, then visiting each quarter; visiting every household during community walks. Home economists with some agricultural background should be retrained to join in that work, while more women especially farmers should be trained as grassroots extension agents, scientists and other professionals.

Neglect of Women Potentials in Agricultural Production.

Women are the principal force in the constant struggle against poverty, misery, hunger, disease etc. They are the unusing heroines of our time. A larger percentage of resource poor farmers worldwide are women who engage in food production. A majority of the world's resource poor farmers are women worldwide, women produce more than 50% of all the food that is grown. In many developing countries, it is estimated that women produce 80% of the food grown in sub-Saharan Africa, 50-60% in Asia, 46% in the Caribbean, 31% in North Africa and the

Near East, and about 30% in Latin America. Women farmers face multiple constraints in obtaining access to improved seeds, new crop varieties, knowledge about improved cropping systems and other forms of technology (FAO, 1995). In line with the above assertion, Jazcury (1992: 285) wrote "New crop varieties are rarely tested or demonstrated on women's fields so that agricultural researchers have learned little about women's specific problems with new varieties and women's needs with regard to crop improvement". Statistical evidence on gender roles in agriculture is very unreliable and in many societies, it is culturally unacceptable both for a woman to say that she works in agriculture and for the census-taker to consider that she might have an economic role.

Literature also shows that women have for long been neglected and this has been at the peril of development at the grassroots. At a Centre for Technical Agriculture (CTA) workshop held in 1994 in Yaaunde, Cameroon, Moise Mensah Observed" We have focussed on productivity instead of household food security. We have disregarded the fact that farmers do not manage individual crops but complex livelihood systems. We have focussed on men and neglected the increasing major role women play in food production in Africa".

Tradition and culture have also been identified by some investigators as constraints on women as most often farm on the land owned by their husbands and/or land allocated to their fathers or brothers as the case may be. According to M'Bow quoted in United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) report "The gods created women for indoor duties and man (sic) for all others... It is proper for women to stay indoors and improper for them to loiter outside. Women virtually everywhere have long been imprisoned without this indoors/outdoors dialectic and will continue to be in many ways".

If rural development policies bothering on agriculture and industry are to be formulated with the aim of satisfying each nation's needs for food and employment opportunities, they can only be put into practice with the active and willing participation of millions of rural women living in scattered distant communities of South-western Nigeria who need to know, to learn and to be motivated to change through efficient communication. It should be noted however that only 7% of agricultural extension service in Africa were directed to women farmers in 1988 and only about 11% of all extension personnel were women (FAO, 1989).

Strategies for Improving Agro-Information Transmission to Rural Women.

Women are reckonable force of rural development and transformation in relation to eradication of poverty, misery, hunger, disease etc. Since women have now learnt to organise themselves into groups and projects, their concerns are no longer isolated ventures easily ignored by governments or community members-such concerns include undue marginalisation for land, credits and others, inputs, fertilizers, chemicals etc. Previously, the restricted flow of credits, seeds, fertilizers and extension services to rural women are gradually being relaxed now so also is the male control of land, cash and decision-making.

Without proper involvement of women in rural development, it is unlikely that the majority of rural communities in Nigeria will be able to feed their people, develop industries based on their primary agricultural products, provide adequate employment or sustain current levels of foreign exchange earnings from their exports. It has been asserted from available literature that if women were taught the basics of nutrition, for example, 50% to 70% of the nutrition problem would be solved. Farming systems research will effectively transform traditional agriculture only when most of these bottlenecks are removed.

In removing these bottlenecks, the methodology to be used for enhancing the understanding of the local situation aim at maximising women farmers' participation and increasing their awareness and self confidence in improving their local situation. The rural womenfolk must be seen to be partners in progress in relation to new crop varieties and animal species, cultivation, upkeep, storage systems etc. Such methods and approaches must be:

- "simple", to be controlled by farmers;
- "quick", prevent frustration and loss of interest.
- aimed at knowing only what is really needed.
- sensitive to social and gender differentiation;
- "informal", taking place at farmers' fields or houses; to make them accessible;
- made up of group sessions alongside interactions with individual farmers (Ann Waters Bayer et al, 1997:114).

In addition, other ways of stimulating these methodologies include;

- story telling, songs or dance about important innovations;
- reconstructing innovations;
- producing local media by encouraging documentation of farmers innovations in songs, poems, proverbs, plays etc or by using "modern" farmer made photographs or drawings, posters or cassette recordings;
- local education and dissemination of information relating to farming technologies.

- socialisation of activities into community institutions for communication and learning; for example, as part of community celebrations, in adult school programmes, or as a regular feature of meeting of local women farmers' organisations.

For the needed information collected to be of lasting value for the women farmers, documentation in the form of latest technologies accessible to them becomes necessary. This will keep them constantly in contact with needed information for meaningful development. This is only possible if the superstructural facilities like good feeder reads, hospitals, storage centres, information centres etc and infrastructural facilities like electricity, potable water, efficient communication are provided.

Conclusion.

Solutions to farming problems are often found among farmers themselves when there is a healthy communication network in a community. Farmers over the years have been known to carry out experiments not only in reaction to outside influences, such as the introduction of new technologies by extension agents, but also on their own initiative – indigenous knowledge (IK) which have been variously disseminated among the rural womenfolk in Southwestern Nigeria. A clear example is the improved cassava varieties i.e. the Tropical manihot selections of the cassava multiplication programme of International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).
Local farmers conduct these initiatives and information search for a number of reasons:

- out of desperation or curiosity of trying out a newly introduced idea that comes to mind.
- to find solution to current pressing farming problems;
- to adapt technologies to local conditions and to the farmers' specific interests and preferences.

Tested and verified information could be disseminated through modern electronic gadgets (as used in developed world) to local co-operative societies and extension officers. Farmer – experimenters could be brought together to provide learning opportunities for other farmers. It is through these communication that effective responses to appropriate technologies for improviding agricultural productivity could be achieved in South Western Nigeria.
Communication needs for agriculture and industry by rural women is such a vast area that requires constant change and it is impossible to make a definite list of priorities. Increasing the competence and enterprise capacity of those involved in rural development especially women should be a major concern of governments. An essential element in providing training for such approaches is not only how to make information available, but also how to make it more accessible.

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